"Were You There?" Sermon Series
Sermon #1 – Peter
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Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent, which began this past week on Ash Wednesday. Lent is an interesting season in the church year. It's not biblical; it first showed up in the church a few centuries after Christ. Lent started as a time of preparation, study, and discipline for people who were going to be baptized on Easter Sunday.

The purpose for the preparation for baptism and the self-discipline was to help Christians regain an awareness of their humanity. The whole purpose of Ash Wednesday is to remind us of our mortality. During Lent, Christians are called to do some self-examination, to see the control that sin has had in our lives. In a sense, the season of Lent is a time to remember that we are human, and that we have fallen short of God's glory.

But we aren't called to remain in that place. That's what Easter is all about. If Lent is a time to remember that we are sinners, then Easter is a time to remember we are forgiven. Now, there's a part of me that would like to skip Lent and go right to Easter. Let's forget this sin stuff and move right to "Christ is risen!" Don't bring me down talking about sacrifice and discipline and self-examination; let's move right to the party!

That sounds good, but to do that would rob Easter of its meaning. You see, if we don't take time to understand our human condition, then we won't understand the significance of Easter. Easter doesn't make sense without Lent and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. If we don't think we need to be saved, then we won't celebrate a risen Savior. Lent is a time for us to remember that every single one of us has sinned against God and each other and every single one of us is in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. If we take the time to realize that and acknowledge it, then we understand the magnitude of the sacrifice made on Good Friday – Christ died for our sins – and we understand the joy of Easter – Christ has defeated death so that we no longer have to fear anything. Because he died on the cross and was resurrected, we're not just dust that will return to dust. We are eternal through our faith in Christ.

Coming to this understanding about ourselves and about Christ is a journey, which is why Lent is a six-week time period. To best understand it, we are called to walk with Jesus as he prepares to go to the cross. For our sermon series this Lent, we'll be looking at a number of people who were with Jesus during his final weeks and days on earth. As we hear their stories, I believe we'll see a little bit of ourselves in them. We'll be present with Christ vicariously through these people, and we'll learn about ourselves and our faith as we listen to their triumphs and tragedies.

We start today with Peter, because Peter is the perfect example of the combination of great faith and tragic humanness. Of all the disciples, Peter stands out for the polarity of his expressions of faith. He would quickly move from moments of utter faithfulness to moments of thick-skulled unbelief. When Jesus walks on water toward the disciples' boat, it is Peter who asks Jesus if he could, too. Peter steps on the waves and takes a few steps of faith until he looks down and loses sight of Jesus. Then he starts to sink, and Jesus saves him from drowning.

In another revealing episode, at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" it is Peter who steps forward and answers, "You are the Christ." Peter's faith allows him to see Jesus for who he truly is, the son of God. Yeah, Peter! And yet, in the next breath, after Jesus predicts his own death, we hear Peter say, "No Lord! It can't happen that way!" And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan!" Boo, Peter!

Peter had the honor of being present at the Transfiguration, but ruined the moment when he tried to capture that uncaptureable experience. Peter was also one of the three disciples that Jesus asked to stay alert while he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, but Peter falls asleep while during his watch. When the party comes to arrest Jesus, Peter, probably feeling guilty for snoozing on duty, jumps up to defend him, cutting off the ear of one of the soldiers.

Are you starting to get a picture of Peter? He's like a puppy dog: one minute he's the most loyal, loveable sidekick; the next, he's piddling on your new carpet or chewing on the sofa. And yet, Peter is loyal, maybe to a fault. Through all of these episodes, he has acted on his faith, which is an amazing feat. Peter deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest disciples.

Until we get to Holy Week. The two accounts we read this morning almost demand that we put an asterisk next to Peter's name: "He was a good disciple, but there was that one thing in the courtyard." That scene is set up by the first one, in which Jesus predicts his disciples will be scattered, and Peter again, without thinking through the implications, pledges his allegiance to Christ.

Peter highlights for us an important principle of belief. It's easy to affirm your faith when you're looking Jesus in the eyes, but it becomes a different story when you're on your own. Many times I have sat in church while the choir was singing or I was listening to a particularly meaningful message. I could almost feel the angels sitting on my shoulders and a ray of God's sunlight washing over me, and I said, "Yes, I believe. No matter what, I believe." And then Monday came, with all its mini-trials and moral dilemmas and challenges to my faith. The choir's voice had faded, the angels were gone, and where was my faith? A writer once said, "Faith is what happens in between glimpses of God." If that's true, we're all guilty of having Swiss-cheese faith – lots of holes in it.

Not long after Peter makes his bold profession of faith, he gets tested. While Jesus is on trial, Peter is confronted three times about being in cohoots with this rabble-rouser. Notice the progress of his denials. At first, Peter claims ignorance – "I don't know what you're talking about"; then, he denies being a part of Jesus' followers; and finally, he swears and flatly denies any relationship with Jesus – "I don't know this man you're talking about." He declares he doesn't know the one who healed his mother-in-law, the one who invited him onto the mountain of transfiguration, the one who helped him walk on water and then saved him from drowning. Where is his faith?

Why Peter? Why, of all the disciples, did he have to fall the farthest? Because it had to be Peter. He is the most likely culprit because he is the least likely. It could have been any of the others, and may well have been. But it has to have been Peter, because if the one of great faith is capable of great treachery, they anyone of lesser faith is, as well including each and every one of us.

How do we deny knowing Christ? We may not do it verbally, but our lives are filled with little denials. Each time we choose not to help satisfy someone else's need, each time we choose to tolerate or participate in gossip or offensive jokes, each time we

choose the comfort of convenience over the challenge of living out our faith, each time we put our things above our God, we deny knowing Christ. Each time we choose to have a faith that can be manipulated to fit our will instead of a will that can be molded to fit our faith, we deny Christ.

To say Peter could deny Jesus is to say any one of us is capable of doing the same. Peter is each of us; he is all of us. And yet, this story is not the end of Peter's story. And the end of this episode, he does something which I believe speaks as loudly as his three denials. He weeps. He cries because he realizes who he is and what he has done. He accepts the brokenness of his human condition. He acknowledges how far he is from God's glory, and how much he needs to be saved and forgiven.

And he is. At the end of Mark, the angel in the empty tomb says to the women, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee." In spite of the denials, Jesus still numbers Peter among his followers, still has work for him to do. Peter goes onto to become one of the greatest proclaimers of Christ's gospel, converting thousands of people to Christianity.

This is a bit of an embarrassing story, isn't it? If I were Peter, I don't know that I would be happy with Mark for sharing it. But did you know that Mark, who wasn't one of the 12 disciples, had one primary source for the writing of his gospel, and that source was Peter. That means that Peter made sure that Mark included this story in the gospel. It's as if Peter is saying, "I want you to know how far I fell, so that you can understand the depth to which Jesus went to forgive and redeem me. If he would do that for me, imagine what Jesus will do for you."

Like Peter, will we both embrace and deny the awesome presence of God in our lives. That's a part of being human. Unfortunately, so is arrogance. We can easily say that we're not as bad as those other people we know, that we're not as in need of forgiveness as the real sinners. Can you imagine Peter trying to rationalize his denials? "It was no big deal, really. It's not like I hurt anyone." But that's not true, is it? Lent, and Peter's story, is all about helping us see our need for forgiveness. We are called to look at ourselves, acknowledge our own weaknesses and denials, and then open ourselves to receiving the greatest gift we could ever be given, the gift of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's love and mercy.

Paul says in I Corinthians 10, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful you don't fall!" If Peter can fall, so can we. If Peter can be humbled by his denials, so can we. If Peter can be forgiven, well, so can we.